

Ultracrunchy Baked Pork Chops

Pork chops with a thick coating that won't fall off require more than just a shake in a bag. We get rid of crumbly crusts and soggy bottoms to create chops with real crunch.

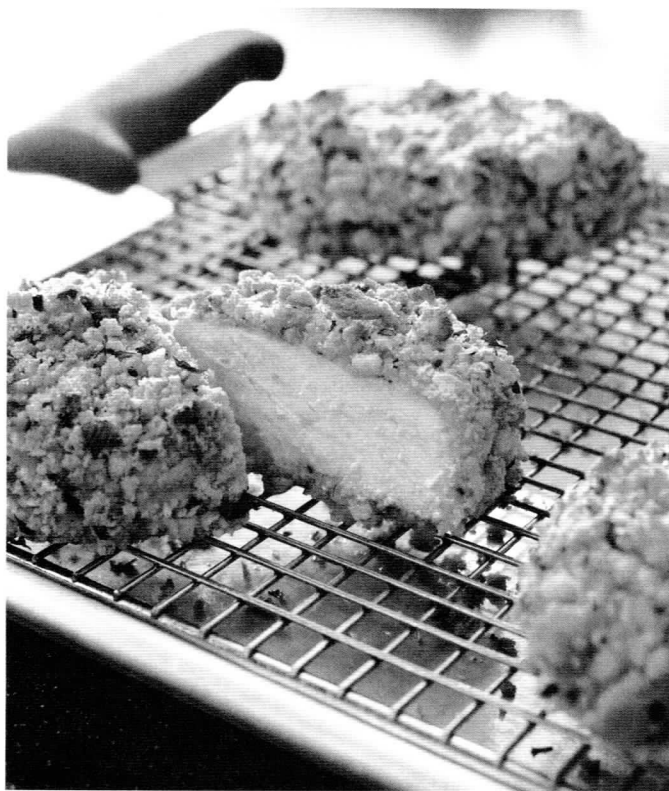
BY SANDRA WU

When done right, baked breaded pork chops are the ultimate comfort food: tender cutlets surrounded by a crunchy coating that crackles apart with each bite. But all too often, baked chops fall short of that ideal. Opt for the convenience of a shaky packaged product from the supermarket for your breading and you wind up with a bland-tasting chop with a thin, sandy crust. Make your own breading with fresh crumbs and the flaws are different—a soggy, patchy crust that won't stick to the meat. My goal was clear: to cook a juicy, flavorful chop with a crisp, substantial crust that would stay on the meat from fork to mouth.

Choice Chops

My first task was choosing the best cut of meat. Though bone-in chops retain moisture better, I decided on a boneless cut for this dish, so I wouldn't have to bread the bone and there would be no distraction from the crunchy crust. This gave me two options: sirloin or center-cut. I settled on center-cut boneless loin chops, which were not only easier to find in the supermarket but also cooked more evenly.

Next I needed to determine the chop size. The ½-inch-thick chops generally used for pan-frying were too easily overwhelmed by the kind of crust I wanted, and the 1½-inch-thick chops usually reserved for barbecuing or stuffing proved to be too thick, giving me too much meat and not enough crust. Pork chops that fell in between—¾ to 1 inch thick—were my tasters' top choice.



A novel technique gives these chops their seriously crunchy coating.

The test kitchen's standard breading method (dusting with flour, dipping in beaten egg, and rolling in toasted bread crumbs) was sufficient as I figured out the best cooking technique. Simply baking the breaded chops on a baking sheet, the most obvious method and one used in many recipes, made the bottoms soggy. I tried breading just the top and sides, and while this quick fix worked, tasters felt

cheated. What if I let air circulation keep the bottom crumbs crisp? Placing the chops on a wire rack set inside the baking sheet definitely helped. Upping the oven temperature from 350 to 425 degrees helped even more. The coating crisped up more readily, and the excess moisture evaporated by the time the pork reached the requisite 150-degree serving temperature.

Crisp and Crunchy

I had figured out the right chops to use and the proper way to cook them. Now I could concentrate on the breading. Tasters deemed panko too fine-textured and bland. Crushed Melba toast was crunchier but didn't stick together. Ultimately, tasters preferred the fresh flavor and slight sweetness of crumbs made from white sandwich bread.

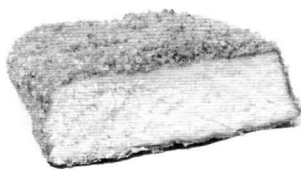
I tossed the fresh crumbs with a little salt, pepper, and oil; then I spread them on a baking sheet and toasted them until they were golden brown. The resulting crust was decently crisp but still not as good as I knew it could be. What if I took a cue from the supermarket coating and toasted the crumbs to a deeper brown? Though boxed crumbs produce a crust that is thin

and sandy, the processed coating does have one thing going for it—a true crispness that I'd yet to achieve. For my next test, I left the crumbs in the oven until they looked dangerously overtoasted and was pleasantly surprised that this worked—the breading didn't burn when baked again on the chops, and my crumb coating was now seriously crisp. To add even more flavor, I stirred in some minced garlic and shallot with the crumbs before they went into the oven and tossed in some grated Parmesan cheese and minced herbs after they cooled. These chops tasted great. Everything would be perfect if I could just ensure one thing: that the crumbs stuck onto the pork evenly, rather than peeling off in patches.

Stick to It

With crumbs as thick and coarse as these, I knew I'd need something with more holding power than a typical egg wash to glue them to the pork. I recalled a cookbook recipe that used mustard instead of eggs to stick crumbs on chops. A straight swap made the taste too intense, but keeping the eggs and adding

RECIPE TESTING: Coatings without the Crunch



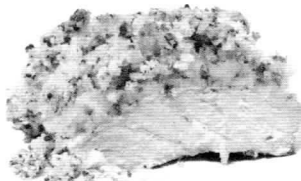
THIN

This popular boxed mix gives chops an insubstantial, bland crust.



PATCHY

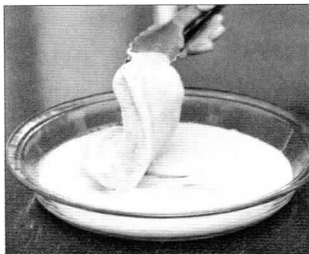
The crust peels off chops dipped in a typical thin egg wash.



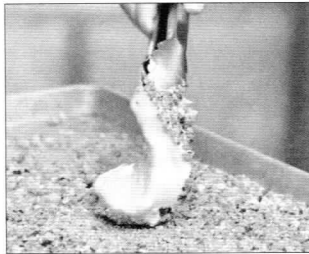
CRUMBLY

Fresh, untoasted crumbs have trouble sticking to the chop.

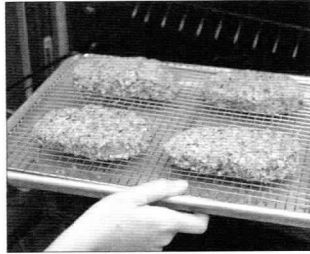
STEP-BY-STEP | SECRETS TO A CRISP COATING



1. DIP A thick batter of flour, mustard, and egg whites grips the bread crumbs like glue.



2. COAT Coating the chops with fresh, well-toasted bread crumbs results in a crust with flavor and crunch.



3. ELEVATE Baking the chops on a rack set in a baking sheet allows greater air circulation and prevents the bottoms from turning soggy.

a few tablespoons of Dijon mustard thickened the mixture nicely and brought just enough new flavor to the mix. But while the crumbs stuck onto the baked chops better than they had with a simple egg wash, a few areas still flaked off.

A fellow test cook wondered aloud what would happen if I got rid of the egg wash altogether and dipped the floured chops into a thick batter before breading them. I laughed. After all, batter is for fried food. Who ever heard of using it for baking? I did it anyway, using a basic fritto misto batter of flour, cornstarch, water, oil, and eggs as my base. Fully expecting this experiment to tank, I was surprised when the pork chops came out with a crust that was crunchier than before and stayed on like a protective sheath. This batter, though, requires resting and seemed too fussy for a weeknight dish. But what if I made a quick egg wash that was more like a batter?

I whisked enough flour into the egg and mustard mixture to give it the thick consistency of mayonnaise. This adhering agent was now more of a spackle than a watery glue. After flouring the chops, I coated them evenly in the egg wash–batter hybrid, covered them in bread crumbs, and baked them again. Much better, but there was a soft, puffy layer directly beneath the crumbs. Replacing the whole eggs with egg whites, which have less fat but enough protein to lend sticking power, provided just the crisp, dry crust I was looking for. But even more impressive, the crumbs clung firmly onto the meat even during some heavy knife-and-fork action. This pork finally had some real chops.

CRUNCHY BAKED PORK CHOPS

SERVES 4

This recipe was developed using natural pork, but enhanced pork (injected with a salt solution) will work as well. If using enhanced pork, eliminate the brining in step 1. The bread crumb mixture can be prepared through step 2 up to 3 days in advance. The breaded chops can be frozen for up to 1 week. They don't need to be thawed before baking; simply increase the cooking time in step 5 to 35 to 40 minutes.

Table salt

- 4 boneless center-cut pork chops, 6 to 8 ounces each, $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1 inch thick, trimmed of excess fat
- 4 slices hearty white sandwich bread, torn into 1-inch pieces
- 1 small shallot, minced (about 2 tablespoons)
- 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon)
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- Ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan cheese
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon minced fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley leaves
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup plus 6 tablespoons unbleached all-purpose flour
- 3 large egg whites
- 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
- Lemon wedges

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Dissolve $\frac{1}{4}$ cup salt in 1 quart water in medium container or gallon-sized zipper-lock bag. Submerge chops, cover with plastic wrap, and refrigerate 30 minutes. Rinse chops under cold water and dry thoroughly with paper towels.

2. Meanwhile, pulse bread in food processor until coarsely ground, about eight 1-second pulses (you should have about $3\frac{1}{2}$ cups crumbs). Transfer crumbs to rimmed baking sheet and add shallot, garlic, oil, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper. Toss until crumbs are evenly coated with oil. Bake until deep golden brown and dry, about 15 minutes, stirring twice during baking time. (Do not turn off oven.) Cool to room temperature. Toss crumbs with Parmesan, thyme, and parsley.

3. Place $\frac{1}{4}$ cup flour in pie plate. In second pie plate, whisk egg whites and mustard until combined; add remaining 6 tablespoons flour and whisk until almost smooth, with pea-sized lumps remaining.

4. Increase oven temperature to 425 degrees. Spray wire rack with nonstick cooking spray and place in rimmed baking sheet. Season chops with pepper. Dredge 1 pork chop in flour; shake off excess. Using tongs, coat with egg mixture; let excess drip off. Coat

The 30-Minute Brine

You might be tempted to skip the brining step when preparing Crunchy Baked Pork Chops. Don't. Center-cut chops are quite lean, and left untreated they will be very dry and chewy, even when cooked to medium (an internal temperature of 150 degrees). The salt in the brine changes the structure of the muscle proteins and allows them to hold on to more moisture when exposed to heat. My tasters had no trouble picking out the chops that I had brined versus chops that I had left untreated.

If you're accustomed to brining a turkey for the holidays, you might think you don't have time to brine pork chops for a weeknight recipe like this. But I found that making the brine super-concentrated (with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of table salt dissolved in 1 quart of water) gets the job done in just 30 minutes—the time it will take you to prepare the fresh bread crumb coating. And my potent brine fits, along with four chops, in a medium container or gallon-sized zipper-lock bag. No brining bucket needed.

One exception: If you've purchased enhanced chops injected with a salt solution, don't brine them. The injected solution will make the chops moist, even spongy, and brining will make the meat way too salty. We prefer the flavor of natural chops and find that 30 minutes in a strong brine makes them plenty juicy. —S.W.

all sides of chop with bread crumb mixture, pressing gently so that thick layer of crumbs adheres to chop. Transfer breaded chop to wire rack. Repeat with remaining 3 chops.

5. Bake until instant-read thermometer inserted into center of chops registers 150 degrees, 17 to 25 minutes. Let rest on rack 5 minutes before serving with lemon wedges.

CRUNCHY BAKED PORK CHOPS WITH PROSCIUTTO AND ASIAGO CHEESE

Follow recipe for Crunchy Baked Pork Chops through step 3, omitting salt added to bread crumb mixture in step 2. Before breading, place $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch-thick slice Asiago cheese (about $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce) on top of each chop. Wrap each chop with thin slice prosciutto, pressing on prosciutto so that cheese and meat adhere to one another. Proceed with recipe from step 4, being careful when handling chops so that cheese and meat do not come apart during breading.

 **COOK'S LIVE** Original Test Kitchen Videos

www.cooksillustrated.com

HOW TO MAKE

- Crunchy Baked Pork Chops

VIDEO TIPS

- How do I mince a shallot?
- How do I mince parsley?